

# SCRATCHPAD

## Better living through philosophy

By ERICK BENGEL  
COAST WEEKEND

Earlier this month, I reconnected with Professor Prakash Chenjeri, the chair of Southern Oregon University's philosophy program who, along with chaplain and author Fred Grewe, led a community talk at the Astoria Library about what makes life meaningful.

It's been nearly 10 years since my last class with Chenjeri, and I told him before the event that although I'd contin-

ued studying undergrad-level philosophy in Portland, I had ultimately gone into journalism.

I may have broken the news somewhat ruefully, for there was a time when I gave serious thought to pursuing philosophy as a grad student, when the most important vocation I could imagine involved dismantling dogmas, clarifying concepts and calling bull---- from a lecturer.

Chenjeri reminded me, though, of something he tells his students: Having a

background in philosophy can help you in almost any field. Whatever career you choose, whatever life you want to live, you benefit from knowing how to unpack ideas, draw distinctions and unearth buried assumptions, and from having the wisdom and humility to recognize when to change your mind.

Philosophy, you see, is not simply a body of knowledge but a skill, a practice, an orientation.

In my 20s, the philosophy classes I enrolled in

— including the nine I took with Chenjeri — offered a refuge of reason from an unruly, angst-addled inner world. Some of my fondest memories are of daily walks to campus, a backpack full of textbooks and course readings, en route to discussing the philosophies of mind and language, science and religion, political theory and critical thinking, logic and ethics.

These dialogues felt vital, urgent and refreshing, as if we had, for an hour or two,

stepped into a stream of conversation that had been flowing for millennia, running through topics that touched everything worth caring about. Absorbing a lesson was like installing the latest anti-virus software on my brain, a way of fortifying my mental defenses against suspicious inputs, of quality controlling my convictions.

I steadily ditched many seductive beliefs I now find idiotic and embarrassing —



DANNY MILLER PHOTO

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